

HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (also known as infectious hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by a virus. The disease is fairly common and usually between 100 to 300 cases are reported each year in Idaho.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it occurs most frequently in young children.

How is the virus spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body and is passed in the stool. The virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and spread by direct contact or by eating or drinking food that has been handled by the infected person. In some cases, it can be spread by drinking water contaminated with untreated sewage. Hepatitis A has recently been thought of as a sexually transmitted disease. It can be passed from partner to partner through various sexually activities.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include tiredness, poor appetite, stomach pain, fever and vomiting. Urine may become darker in color and then jaundice (a yellow coloring of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. Most people recover in a few weeks without any complications, but some very elderly people may need to be hospitalized. Infants and young children tend to have very mild symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone who is infected will have all of the symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear between 15 to 50 days (approximately 2-6 weeks) after being exposed, but usually within 3-4 weeks.

How long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about a week or so before the symptoms appear and extends up to one week after the jaundice appears.

Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

Once a person recovers from hepatitis A, he or she is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed. Sometimes sick people need extra fluids.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

A vaccine is available at local health departments and some physicians' offices. The best way to prevent spread to other people in your house or work is careful hand washing after using the toilet. Also, infected people should not handle foods during the time they can spread it (the contagious period). Household members or others in close contact with an infected person should call a doctor or the health department to obtain a shot of immune serum globulin or hepatitis A vaccine which will reduce their chances of becoming ill.

Where can I learn more about hepatitis A?

Call your personal health care provider or district health office. For referrals and additional information contact the National STD Hotline at (800) 227-8922 or for local Idaho Referrals and information the Idaho CareLine at (800) 926-2588.

